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Kevin Baker

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### Abstract

When I was posted to Wollongong as a first-year out teacher in 1969 I had never heard of the Mt. Kembla mining disaster even though it's identity, as the greatest land disaster in Australia's history, should have given it some status beyond Wollongong itself. Despite my involvement in Trade Union and Labor Party politics in subsequent years I had still not heard of it until its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1977. Around that time articles began to appear in the Mercury based on an inter-disciplinary study, conducted by Wollongong University, of the disaster and the way in which the people of the village at the time, Wollongong and Australia as a whole, responded to and coped with this traumatic event.

# The Transcendence of Disaster: Mt Kembla, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1902

**Kevin Baker**

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I was, at that time performing in *The Currency Folk Band* as well as teaching a course to year nine Australian history students in which use was made of folk songs as original source documents. Both the possibility of finding songs and the anonymity of the disaster intrigued me and I spent some time in the archives at the Wollongong Library reading all the documents I could find that were relevant to the event and its aftermath. I found that the reports of the time were at variance with both my feelings and much of the work done by the University and I found only two songs that were at all relevant to the disaster and neither of these captured it's essence nor the scope of the event—nor the feelings it aroused in me and, I would suspect, the miners and their families who were involved in it.

In 1986 I brought out an album entitled *Still a Rich Man's Land* with *The Currency Folk Band* and included on that album was my song *The Mount Kembla Mining Disaster*, which had been written after the research I had done in 1977. In the cover notes to the album I wrote an outline of and my response to the event, which I now quote:

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1902 an explosion occurred at the entrance to the Mt. Kembla Mine resulting in the immediate deaths of thirteen

people and triggering-off what is still the greatest land disaster in Australian history. The explosion was caused by a build-up of gas in the mine and this gas, mixed with the carbon dioxide that resulted from the combustion and explosion, spread quickly through the tunnels of the mountain mine.

At the time some three hundred men were working inside the mountain. The concussion was felt in the shafts and some miners who survived reported being knocked down by its force. As they made their way to the pit-head and safety, many miners walked into waves of gas (rising-damp and after-damp as they called its two varieties) which snuffed out their lives. The final death toll was ninety-six and in the tiny mining village of Mt. Kembla, not one home was left untouched by tragedy; a number lost all their men-folk.

Responses to the tragedy are illuminating. Almost immediately Bulli miners and their wives, who had lost eighty-one of their own in a similar tragedy some fifteen years earlier, donated money to help the often destitute survivors and, all around Australia, ordinary people donated what they could when appeals were made to them for assistance. In Wollongong itself the mine owners, an English company, organised a mass grave at place called Windy Gully for those too poor to bury their dead (it is said that they feared an outbreak of disease) and a monument was erected in Wollongong itself to commemorate those who had died. Over the years this was designated a traffic hazard by the industry-dominated Council and, after a brief stay at a 'safer location' it found its way back up the mountain to the little church graveyard where it resides today among the many individual headstones of disaster victims.

Over a period of time then, the Wollongong burghers ejected the memory of the ninety-five workers who died in the mine though a large and attractive inner-city park commemorates the ninety-sixth, one Major McCabe, doyenne of the establishment and ex-Mayor of the town who died trying to lead a rescue attempt; the same Major McCabe who had been given a lavish state funeral at a time when miners bodes were being rushed into the earth as the owners hurried through the clean-up necessary before the production of coal could be resumed some seven weeks later.

An inquiry was subsequently held and some criticism was directed at the mine management but the Mt. Kembla Coal and Oil Company was a large English based capital enterprise and could respond philosophically to the deaths of a hundred colonial workers even if they now referred to themselves by the grand title of Australian. Some expression of regret was of course obligatory but to dwell on what might quite rightly be explained to the shareholders a minor financial setback would be unhealthy.

## Illawarra Unity

The Laws of Nature and Commerce are ordained and immutable; only those dangerous radicals and socialist would see the loss of life as more important than the long-term economic significance of the event.

This song mourns the death of all ninety-six men and celebrates the courage and endurance of the men and women of Mt. Kembla Village who, despite the enormity of their loss, were back in the struggle for industrial and political justice even as they wept for their dead.

Going back to these writings after twenty-five years their passionate outrage surprises me. After all the history of coal mining in Australia and overseas has innumerable incidents where large numbers of lives were lost. They were no more than a factor of production and their deaths were an unfortunate additional cost. Still the sheer number of fatalities and the previous warnings from miners of gas in the mine together with the continued use of open flame lamps in a gas prone mine (the Davey lamp was available at the time but not used at Mt. Kembla) suggest a culpability on the part of the mine owners which today would be seen as tantamount to murder or at least unlawful killing.

But it is not just this that makes the disaster so noteworthy. Dr. Reix in *The Plague* by Albert Camus (a novel about the ravages of and resistance to Nazism in Europe) says "... and to state it quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence; that there are more things to admire in men than to despise". The truth of this is attested in the aftermath of that explosion at the pit-head at Mt. Kembla Min the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1902. The selfless courage of the off-shift miners who went down into what they knew was a death trap to try and save their unfortunate comrades; the donations from miners and other workers around Australia who often had little money themselves to help the victims; the way in which the Village people rallied to help each other despite their own grief and; their refusal to be crushed by this cataclysmic event. Together with their eventual victory in achieving, through their struggle, their unions and their politicians, decent wages and safer working conditions for all miners and workers in Australian society.

This song, then, is not simply a dirge, though the reality of their loss needed to be stated. It is a celebration of heroism, compassion and a struggle for justice against the odds, in which the Australian miners who survived this disaster and others like it were ultimately victorious.